COVENANT: PART III
OUR PART OF THE BARGAIN
Exodus 20:1-17
March 17, 1985

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Text: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37, 39)

Love means caring enough to say "no". Love means saying "yes" to a lot of things: to intimacy, and joy, and play, and fun, and adventure. But love also needs to be big enough and strong enough sometimes to say "no." Several years ago two psychologists, David and Phylis York, coined a phrase which is now universally understood - "tough love." The idea is simple: when dealing with children who are constantly in trouble, understanding and forgiveness are laudable, but alone, they are not enough. Tough love sets standards, draws a bottom line and sticks to it.

I get involved on occasion with groups which are concerned about substance abuse in our society. Almost all the people who seem to know what they are doing agree that in order to be effective in this arena parents have to love their children strongly enough to risk being disliked by them. A psychologist I know said that to a roomful of parents one time and after the nervous chuckles subsided, went on: "The trouble with all your professional people is that you feel guilty about your children. You worry about not spending enough time with them, you constantly analyze your own parenting and calculate your deficiencies and then feel guilty. And you have a very hard time making decisions that will cause your children to be unhappy."

Love means the strength to say "no" at strategic times. In that "no" an important "yes" is said: a loving affirmation which is usually understood and appreciated years later. We are grateful for the fact that our parents said "no" to us: that they cared about us enough to set standards. At the time, however, we didn't like it and it probably wasn't easy for them, and it required that they love us with special strength.

That is what is going on in the 20th chapter of the Book of Exodus. It was one of those delightful New Yorker cartoons several years ago I believe that showed a group of Israeli Army officers around a map strewn table in their Situation Room. One of them said: "Just think: if Moses had turned right we'd have the oil and they'd have the Ten Commandments." Joseph Heller's irreverent King David remembers: "'I'll give you laws,' said God. 'I've got laws to give you that you have never heard before...That's what he promised and that's all he gave us, along with a complicated set of dietary rules that have not made life easier. To the goyim he gives bacon, sweet pork, juicy sirloin and rare prime ribs of beef. To us he gives a pastrami. In Egypt we get the fat of the land. In Leviticus he prohibits us from eating it." (God Knows, p. 24)

The historical situation is this: the Hebrew tribes, thriving in Egypt, in the land of Goshen, have been freed from their slavery after a remarkable series of calamities. Led by Moses, they narrowly escape the pursuing armies of Pharoh at a swampy tidal basin known as the Sea of Reeds and suddenly find themselves, amazingly, frighteningly free, liberated - from slavery, but for what no one seems to know. The one thing for sure is that they are in a wilderness and after three months or so of wandering in the wilderness they make camp at the base of a mountain called Sinai. And there the loose-knit tribes, families, clans - become a nation.

The covenant, whispered first back on the edges of history between their ancestors Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and the one God is remembered and now renewed at Sinai. The terms of the covenant are a law: ten basic principles on the basis of which God's people will live together. Ethicists, political scientists, jurists ever since have suggested that these ten principles, or something very close to them, constitute the basis for any civilization that wishes to survive. Time has honored them. But as they are here conveyed by Moses to the people they are more than laws. They begin, not with a moral principle: for instance "God is righteous and here are ten ways to conform to God's standards." That is how most morality begins. This system differs radically, at the prologue. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me." The prologue is not God's moral perfection, but liberating activity. William Barclay thought that was so important that we ought to attach the prologue to each of the individual commands: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out...Honor your parents...I am the Lord your God who brought you out...You shall not steal..."

The peculiarity here is the Judeo-Christian genius: God acts - people respond. It is called the rhythm of grace. God loves us first - we react to that love. God gives life - we thank him. God saves - we respond. Grace - then faith. You don't get to heaven by fulfilling God's ethical quotas, but because in love God has opened the gates and invited everybody to come in. It is the most revolutionary idea in the history of religion and it is there, on Mt. Sinai, at the beginning of the story.

The ten principles fall into two clear categories: those governing the relationship between individuals and God, and those having to do with the relationship between people. Reverence and justice. That is our secondary genius. Grace is first: second is the idea that God cares equally about our religion and our politics, our piety and our economics. In Judaism and Christianity, you can't have one without the other. You're not supposed to worship idols and you're not supposed to take things from your neighbor and God cares equally about both. It is not possible in any Christian sense to separate theology from ethics. The early Christians knew that and one of them wrote with great impact, if not finesse: "If a man says he loves God and hates his neighbor he is a liar."

The judgment of history is that the slaves become free people not only when they are liberated from someone else's bondage, but when they voluntarily submit to the self-limiting restrictions and the internal discipline of the law. History's judgment is that the law is not burden but the secret of survival, the source of life. Israel lived through the wilderness because of the covenant. Love means saying "no" sometimes. Love means caring enough about people to hold them accountable. Life depends on it.

The temptation, of course, is to translate the principles into rules, and rules to interpret the rules, and rules to cover the exceptions to the rules. And so before long Israel not only knows it is supposed to observe a Sabbath, it now has scrolls full of regulations defining what activities are in violation of the Sabbath principle. And, following suit Christians have sometimes thought it important to enforce a restrictive and moralistic understanding of that principle on themselves and on all of society, so that I can't hear the Fourth Commandment without remembering my childhood chum, on hot summer Sunday afternoons, confined to his front porch, with a tie on, watching enviously as my parents' Presbyterianism allowed me to head off for the baseball field or swimming pool.

Allowing, of course, for the richness which deversity produces, the trouble is that the rhythm of grace gets interupted and revised somewhere in the middle of that. And instead of understanding that the reason for these rules is to live a grateful life because of God's love, slowly we begin to think that if we obey these rules God will surely love us, or worse yet, if we violate the rules, God will surely stop loving us. At that point the rhythm of grace is gone: morality has become moralism: and the life-affirming, life-giving covenant offered by God has become a restrictive covenant by which we may keep all the undesirables out of the ecclesiastical neighborhood. Which is what Mr. Falwell did so eloquently when he came to town last week. "Do it our way or get out. Only born again Christians can work at the college. Only right thinking politicians should be elected."

When Jesus was asked the question of religious ethics, God's brand of morality, he did a very interesting thing. A lawyer asked: "Teacher what is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus knew the content of Exodus 20. The lawyer knew he knew. Jesus also knew that the question itself reflected a distortion of the covenant, and so he answered in a very interesting way. He took the ten principles which gave life to Israel at Sinai and recast them in two positive statements. The five commandments which have to do with an individual's relationship with God come out - "Love God with heart, soul and mind." The five commandments which regulate the relationships between people within the covenant come out, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus keeps faith with tradition. But now, new power, new relevance is added as Jesus recasts the largely negative principles into two strong positive commands to love God and neighbor.

A contemporary physicist, John Platt, remarked recently that "Jesus did not leave a philosophy of life, but a set of active verbs." (Martin Marty, Context, 3/15/85) Go, sell, follow, teach, heal, love, obey. The temptation, however, is to reduce his positive imperative to love, to the same old legalistic and negative moralism. Part of that stems from the same dynamic that gave Israel laws on top of laws. It is, in fact, easier to know how to live like a Christian if someone can tell you what to do and what not to do, instead of having to decide yourself how to love your neighbor. But part of it, today, stems from a real need for moral clarity in a very complex world. Where is right and wrong in the ethical nightmare of the artificial prolongation of human life by high medical technology? Where is the clarity in the Right of Choice/Right to Life debate? or in the predicament of deciding to support a racist government economically or withdraw our support and perhaps our ability to influence positively? Where is the moral clarity in those distressing statistics released last week that reveal that with everything we think we are doing right, and with all the moralizing American

young people still lead the world in unwanted pregnancies by a margin of two to one? We desperately want ethical simplicity and moral clarity...in the world, of the kind German Fascism and the attack on Pearl Harbor handed to us 45 years ago, and personally of the kind the sociology of the 1930's and 40's seemed to offer: curfews, soda fountains, Glen Miller, and small midwestern Main Streets. The temptation today is to oversimplify: to wrench simple moralisms out of our moral principles. It is tempting and it is so satisfying emotionally to know who the bad people are, who the evil empire is, and which side to be on.

Jesus resisted that. His people in each age are charged with the serious responsibility of reminding the world that the Gospel is not a list of moralisms but a challenge to decide complex issues in the freedom of a love that wants to be responsible.

The purpose, after all, is life. We need nothing so much, I think, as to remind ourselves on occasion that God's purpose in establishing a covenant, in calling a people, in sending a son, is to provide the way for people to enjoy the gift of life he has given. God's purpose is not, as it sometimes seems, to satisfy a narrow standard of righteousness by circumscribing all the delightful possibilities of our humanity. It is precisely the opposite of that. It is to give us life. "I have come that you might have life - fully," Jesus said once. That is what Iranaeus, the early church theologian, meant in a hauntingly beautiful image: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." And it is what those crusty old Calvinists meant in the 17th century when they allowed that "our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

The purpose is life. The covenant, with its ten commanding principles, was the formula for life as those tribes faced four decades of wilderness. I am convinced that it is a powerful metaphor for our time: that facing a wilderness of enormous dangers, the key to life is that same imperative to love: to love God: to reverence and respect and celebrate the holiness of life in this blessed world, and to respect and reverence and celebrate the sanctity of the life of every man, woman, and child who shares it with us. Suddenly, that strong, moral love looks like the only alternative with a future attached to it.

Bill Coffin quoted the philosopher Descarte recently: "'Cogito, Ergo Sum.'- 'I think, therefore I am.' Everybody agrees that is the beginning of philosophy. With characteristic bluntness, Coffin said, 'Nonsense! Amo, Ergo Sum' - 'I love, therefore, I am.' We are as we love. Love is the name of our journey and our moral imperative and our vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ." (<u>The Courage to Love</u>, p. 35)

It was, and it is, the formula for life. God cares about us, and wants our life to be as full and rich and joyful as it can be. Our part of the covenant bargain is to accept the fact that we are loved of God: to accept it by living in love: strong, creative, obedient love - faithful to the one who, himself, loved so much he died for us.

And now to the one who is able to keep us from falling, to the one God, ruler of all, be honor and praise, forever. Amen.